

Mahon vows fight against pressure on Congress to spend

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Standing guard over the public's purse can be a lonely vigil, as Rep. George H. Mahon will attest.

But that doesn't deter the courtly Texas Democrat who vows to fight off all pressures to unbalance the nation's budget this year.

Indeed, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and its powerful defense-spending subcommittee has hopes of seeing the \$2.4 billion surplus forecast by former President Johnson actually come true.

Even so, Mr. Mahon indicated recently to this newsmen, he would welcome just a bit more public gratitude for those on his 50-member panel who labor to hold back federal spending.

"The average office seeker," he lamented, "runs on a platform of what he will do for the people—what he will do. He does not concentrate on how much money he will save; he talks of the bright, new world which he is going to help bring about."

Nor does the conservative Texas find the free-spending mood confined to those in public life.

Goals assessed

"The housewives don't lie awake at night worrying about how to save money," he complains. "They lie awake figuring ways and means of buying color televisions, a second or third car, carpeting for the floor, maybe a new house."

Even those supposedly frugal bankers and merchants are joining the tax-and-spend set.

"The chambers of commerce talk about economy," Mr. Mahon observes, "but their testimonial dinners are reserved for the people who help to get projects and spend money. They're not particularly moderate about spending money. They just say so."

"The trend is for spending rather than saving. This is evident in the Congress. They ask: 'What can you do for the people back home?' Economy and saving is not the most exciting thing to tell the voters about."

Yet Mr. Mahon and Rep. Frank T. Bow (R) of Ohio, the ranking Republican on his committee, seem determined to buck the tide.

After the Johnson budget for 1969-70 reached Congress, Mr. Bow recalled the trillion dollars spent during the Johnson years

and suggested tartly that he would pat Congress on the back only when the fiscal year ends with the projected surplus intact.

"When he [Mr. Johnson] first came to the Congress, the budget was \$5 billion," he recalled. "Now we are operating on a budget of over \$200 billion. So we can see the pace at which we have gone in these figures."

Mr. Mahon, an eloquent floor spokesman for the House "economy block," also counseled Congress to again "make a Herculean effort" to trim the budget.

"Emergencies arise," he warned. "As James A. Garfield once so well observed, 'War overturns all ordinary calculations.'"

"History strongly cautions us to assume that the budget will turn out for the worse rather than the better; that it is wise to hedge against the uncertainties, the slippages, the failures."

Task described

That day in mid-January Mr. Mahon set forth in his usual crisp phrasing the task facing his committee.

"All presidents," he said, "are characteristically—and understandably—optimistic in tone and outlook."

"A budget is a plan, a projection, a set of recommendations. It is not self-executing. Uncertainties abound. It depends on legislative action or inaction, on performance of the economy, on the state of world affairs, and on on."

"The budget outlook is therefore tentative. For many reasons it very often winds up wide of the mark on both sides of the ledger. The realizations often do not match the expectations. . . ."

Measures traded

One day last week Mr. Mahon marched into his office, removed his stetson, and launched into a discourse on how he and his committee colleagues intend to hold the line on spending.

The House had taken extreme measures in 1968 to curb inflation. It passed the Revenues and Expenditures Control Act in turn for granting President Johnson a belated 10 percent surtax. Even Mr. Mahon admits that "it had a meat-ax flavor." But it brought results.

"There is no doubt but that the act made the departments and agencies take a real good long look at their spending policies," he said dryly. "In that way it was a good move. It may be that this procedure is here to stay."

Division suggested

The 1968 law required a cutback in appropriations and new spending authority of \$10 billion. Congress went even further, another \$6 billion reduction in spending and a severe whittling down of the federal payroll.

Mr. Mahon calls the forced savings "an awkward approach." Yet he says many House members want to explore its further use.

"I would like to see Congress appropriate the funds it feels should be spent and leave the management of the programs and funds up to the executive branch," he maintains. "That's been my philosophy all through the years."

Yet carry-over of unused funds from long-range programs like ship, weapon, and aircraft production "leaves something to be desired," the chairman says. The big backlog of unused monies from one fiscal year to the next gives the administration wide flexibility. But Congress feels that the "power of the purse" is being usurped. Thus, the receptivity to new "control" devices.

The House could also benefit, Mr. Mahon believes, by adopting some of the budgeting ideas suggested recently by former Secretary of the Treasury Joseph W. Barr, a former congressman.

Forecast proposed

Mr. Barr urges Congress to debate and enact a resolution by March 1 each year setting forth its own forecasts of economic factors and the probability of a deficit or surplus. Then, by April 1, both Houses would vote on a budget with total spending, lending, and revenue targets.

"There is much merit in trying to induce Congress to zero in on the whole picture," Mr. Mahon admits. "There is a tendency to look at programs and say: 'Well, this is a thing that needs to be done.'"

"We continue to look at these programs as pieces rather than at the budget as a whole. . . . We should consider whether or not we're willing to raise the revenue for these services.

If we're willing to, then we should approve it," he says. "If we don't think enough of the program—and I'm speaking generally—we should suspend or postpone it."